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INTERNEWS

September 28, 1998

Anita Wallgren, Legal Advisor
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street, NW, Room 832
Washington, DC 20554

MM 93.25

Dear Ms. Wallgren:

I understand that the Commission and its staff are considering adoption of a rule that would permit Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) providers to select the programmers whose programming will be aired on the channel capacity set-aside for noncommercial, educational and informational programming required by the 1992 Cable Act. My concern is that if DBS providers are allowed to exercise such editorial discretion, programming which provides diverse views and information, especially material addressed to underserved audiences, will not be available to American viewers.

I am the President of Internews, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization which, among other things, produces and distributes non-commercial programming on national and international issues, including documentaries and weekly television news magazines.

I am providing, for your information, a package of materials describing Internews' programming and its other projects. Programs such as *Fourth Estate* and *Vis á Vis* have been well received by viewers and critics alike. *Fourth Estate* is a weekly series analyzing the role of the media in the former Soviet Union. The *Vis á Vis* documentary series combines documentary footage and video conference links to create intimate, in-depth dialogues between people living on different continents who represent diverse perspectives on critical issues. Internews' programming is seen in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Beyond providing news programming, Internews utilizes television to fulfill its most important role as an initiator of civic discourse essential to public participation in a democracy and a global society.

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My opposition to allowing DBS providers to select programmers for the set-aside is based on adverse experiences we have had in attempting to gain access to the national media in the United States. National media executives assure us that our programming is of the highest quality. They say that the reason they nevertheless decline to use Internews' materials is because there is not a sufficient market for international news and information. My concern is that if DBS providers are given the authority to select programmers based on commercial market considerations, they will similarly deny access to our programming. This would run contrary to what I understand to be the purpose of the set-aside -- to address such market failures by creating opportunities for the dissemination of diverse views and information and to serve underserved audiences, regardless of mass market appeal.

It is in serving underserved needs that Internews' programming is most critical. It has been well documented that international news coverage and cultural programming in this country is sharply declining in both quality and quantity and is generally skewed to a purely American perspective. Serge Halimi, writing for *Le Monde Diplomatique*, recently stated that American journalism is "a journalism which succeeds because it is easier and more profitable, which entertains rather than informs, and which *chooses to ignore the international dimension of the news.*" (Serge Halimi, *Le Monde Diplomatique* - August-September 1998, "US Press Obsessed With Local Issues: Myopic and Cheapskate Journalism, <<http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/inside/1998/09/09halimi.html>>.) Halimi points out that "[i]n an average half-hour news bulletin, crime, weather reports, accidents, disasters, media celebrities, sports and advertising add up to an average total of 24 minutes 20 seconds. This leaves 5 minutes 40 seconds each evening for covering all other local news, foreign news, health, education, science, the environment, etc." *Id.* Permitting DBS providers to make editorial decisions based on profitability will only exacerbate this problem.

Since 1989 Internews has expended over sixty million dollars of US taxpayer funds in helping the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe develop their own independent broadcast media. The fundamental concept behind such assistance is that a democratic, pluralistic media requires the independence of the programmer. Any compromise on this issue will essentially negate the 1992 Cable Act's goal to provide noncommercial, educational and informational programming.

I cannot stress too strongly the impact of the Commission's decision regarding DBS providers' power to select programmers on the noncommercial set-aside. By withholding that power, the Commission will open a pathway for creative and informative programming which responds to the diverse needs and interests of American viewers, especially underserved communities. If I can make any further contributions to your decision making process regarding this matter, please feel free to contact me at any time either by phone at 707-826-2030, x126 or by e-mail at dhoffman@internews.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David Hoffman", followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

David Hoffman
President

Enc.